

Keeping the Home Fires Burning: Dorothy Canfield and the Domestic Space of the Great War

Dorothy Canfield, who had lived in France for periods as a child and spoke French fluently, returned to that country with her own small children during the Great War, where she worked with the war blind while her husband trained ambulance drivers. Her impressions of the conflict, written in the form of semi-autobiographic short stories, are collected in three volumes: *Home Fires in France* (1918), *The Day of Glory* (1919) and *Raw Material* (1923). Unlike two of her fellow countrywomen, Edith Wharton and Willa Cather, whose World War I writing has continued, however sporadically, to attract critical attention, Canfield's tales have been almost completely overlooked. The primary reason for this is that the reactions of non-combatants—particularly women—to their wartime experiences are traditionally ignored by the men whose opinions have shaped our literary canon. Wharton's and Cather's writings on the war have survived only because the complete *oeuvres* of both artists have gained in popularity as the century has progressed, and academics, always on the look-out for new things to say about well-established writers, have ensured that even the less famous works of these two writers will receive occasional comment.

To be fair, Canfield's skills as a writer do not approach those of Wharton and Cather and it is not for her *vignettes* of life in France during the war, but for her work in the field of education that she is remembered at all. There has, however, been a growing interest among feminist critics in the fact of war, and an increasing demand, in several excellent books and articles of recent years, for a re-consideration of women's own words about that momentous event of 1914-1918 and its influence on the literary conscience of the rest of the century. For this reason, Dorothy Canfield's war stories—however conservative and patriotic as they may at first seem to be, deserve a close analysis within the framework of the feminist theories of militancy that have emerged in the last few decades.

The aspect of war which has most concerned feminists is the blatant androcentrism which underlies all its productions. Critics have pointed out that the patriarchy's ability to demand that "all our Citizens be Soldiers, and all our Soldiers Citizens" (Elshtain 90) has successfully formed an emotional image of patriotism which, even today, is designed to undermine women's socio-political contributions to the countries in which they live. Our images of the wars fought in this century continue to be suffused with the sense that such wars occupy a distant space: the "Front" where a man battles to beat an enemy who threatens his women and children at home. Sometimes home, which is persistently conjured in the minds of male combatants as an area of safety and comfort, is militarised by the eponym "the Home Front". The harsh truth about this mythical place is that it has, at least for the wars of

this century (and probably before that), never existed. But the idea of there being two spaces, the dangerous, male-occupied one and the one he protects, is so pervasive that even recent feminist revisions of the idea of war fall into the trap of asserting that it is only with "the development of nuclear technology", a form of war that is absolute and knows no boundaries, that "the home front becomes the battlefield" (Cooper et al. xix)¹. This statement should be taken as a warning that it is all too easy for women—even those who are vigilant about masculine constructs of war—to be trapped into accepting that they occupy a different and less obviously militarised space during wartime. As the women who experienced life in occupied France and the Zeppelin attacks on London knew, to paraphrase Milton's Satan, "this is war, nor am I out of it". The danger of too much theorising about the facts of war and their effects on women is that it too often ignores what they have actually written about their experiences, as is demonstrated here. Although Canfield's short stories strike the contemporary reader as conservative—their format is reminiscent of the popular nineteenth century sketch or Thoreau's tales, and they are not possessed of the same acute psychological insights that characterise the work of Cather and Wharton—it is in their consideration of women's experience of strife that they are particularly useful. They are, whether situated in domestic spaces which have been devastated by the war, or in hospitals where women try to make sense of lives shattered by the conflict, concerned to record what World War I was like for combatants.

Although this is not a theme which Canfield appears consciously to develop, it is interesting to consider the extent to which her stories reflect an issue which is much more markedly explored by some of her contemporaries: the extent to which women's bodies are possessed by and for the war. In Canfield's short stories, women continuously battle to keep their homes and families intact in the face of war, but they do so always within rigid parameters of gender-defined roles. Although women may be forced to take over men's work, Canfield tends to emphasise the fact that they do so only to tide things over until their husbands can return from the conflict. She does not seem particularly willing to question traditional assumptions about what good wives and mothers will do when their men return.

Because her writing is concentrated on domestic space in the time of war, it is interesting to see how she handles the issue of wartime childbirth. Babies are born in two of her stories, at the moment that the Germans invade in "La Pharmacienne" and in a German prison of war in "What Goes Up...", and are adopted or fostered in two others, "The Permissionaire" and "On the Edge". In all four instances, the women are seen to cope courageously with their situations.

Canfield is to be applauded, I think, for considering something which is uniquely the experience of women in war. She is, as far as I know, the only writer of this period to have done so. But even from this concern with what would appear uniquely to be women's space, comes an irony: all the babies in her stories are male—strong, well-formed boy children whom it is impossible not to see, vividly, as tall men in khaki. It is difficult to tell whether this is a subconscious criticism of the way in which women's bodies are turned into war machines which "produce...at enormous cost, the primal munition of war" (Schreiner 169), or a reflection of a spirit of neo-natalism on the part of the writer³. One wonders what power is at work in Canfield's mind that makes her consistently write male infants into the text: are they replacements, in some way, for the men who have been lost? Or does the presence of male children represent an encoding of the idea that men "play" at war while women preserve and restore civilisation? Canfield is, unfortunately, unwilling to explore the irony of such questions.

It is also difficult to tell how far the irony of her title *Home Fires in France* extends (especially since this volume is dedicated to General Pershing). Does she endorse the war time propaganda which sought to mobilise public spirit through militarising it, or is there an ironic reference to the conflagration of domestic space which was so much a part of World War I? I find myself, whilst reading Canfield's stories, wondering why she is not more overt in her descriptions of the war. The blinded men who inhabit her pages are not the savagely devastated men in the works of other women, like Mary Borden, Helen Smith, and Irene Rathbone. Canfield's war wounded are a strangely acquiescent group who rarely express anger at the system that has robbed them of their health and youth—but then, Canfield's purpose, unlike that of her contemporaries, seems to be to record, without questioning or criticising, the events of the time. Perhaps what is disconcerting to a contemporary reader seemed to her to be the only way of coming to terms with the facts of the war.

However, having made this point, I wish to deconstruct my own expectations of what war literature should be about: the masculine model in which I have been soaked seems to dictate that a certain level of violence, dislocation, and shock should be part of the text. Much writing by women has—whether knowingly or not—achieved the same effect. Canfield, however, does not fill her pages with gas, gangrene and ghouls. And this in itself is disturbing, causing the reader to raise questions about her legitimacy as a critic of war; our expectations that women will overtly censure the horrors of battle are so deeply ingrained as to make it difficult to evaluate something which doesn't immediately strike one as disjointed, modernist, and obviously pacifist. In a sense, then, Canfield's stories succeed in disturbing our ideas of what to expect from war writing. Is it profitable to consider Canfield as a woman who is legitimising women's experience of war (those women, that is, who were not conscripted into the V.A.D., the Y.M.C.A., munitions factories, and so on)? Who, we must ask, tells the story of the women who did not nurse thousands of wounded and poisoned men, or risk being blown up in

factories? If a woman's experience of war was the unglamorous one of a mother fighting to feed and clothe her children, is it any less a legitimate experience of mortal combat than that of a front-line nurse? Does Dorothy Canfield, by writing about this side of warfare, give sanction to an otherwise undocumented (and, even today, largely ignored) experience of the societal convulsion that is a war? And, most importantly, does her work receive the recognition that is increasingly being awarded to the war writing of other women who, because they so vividly describe all that we expect to hear about battle, have retained a poignancy—and even, bizarrely, a glamour—that her writing lacks.

In an effort to begin to address some of these questions, I will concentrate on a close reading of several of the stories in Canfield's collections. In the first portrait in *Home Fires in France*, Canfield describes the effect on young American soldiers of entering a thousand-year old French village. The purpose of this apparently anecdotal tale, it soon becomes clear, is to establish in the mind of the reader what life in France before 1914 was like. It is a simple description of an ancient history which is still being lived, but the effect of it ripples through the rest of the collection because it so vividly captures France's innocence and lack of preparedness for war. Other writers, more versed in gruesome, bungled combat, fill their pages with bitter reflections on the thousands who died in pointless battles, but the cumulative effect of the sense of the loss of an entire world, is no less poignant in Canfield's picture of village life in antebellum France. The importance of this lyrical *vignette* is clear only when we move on to the second story, "The Permissionaire", which is an account of a soldier's return to his village after it has been liberated from German occupation. The soldier's solitary, moonlit walk through devastated countryside on his way home is rendered all the more moving by contrast with the village scene which was described in the preceding tale. To our surprise, for we have been assured that "the Germans carried back to work in Germany all women who hadn't children under three" (*HF* 278), the soldier, Pierre Nidart, finds his family surviving in the ruins of their village. The reason that Nidart's wife has escaped slavery is that she has taken into foster-care the son of a cousin, a woman who died soon after childbirth because she believed that her husband had been killed in the war. Cousin Louise's death, even though it was indirectly the means by which Nidart's own family was saved, is dismissed as foolish and traitorous; the narrator describes the baby as "the child of a woman who had given up, who had let herself be beaten, who had let herself be killed, who had abandoned her baby to be cared for by another, braver woman" (*HF* 55). This passage is quite startling, for it reflects, unquestioningly it would seem, the extent to which Canfield accepts and endorses the militarisation of women. In times of war, the patriarchy demands, it is the duty of females to bear children, and any mother who rejects her role as the producer of "cannon-fodder", who gives up life in despair at its harshness, fails her nation. To the contemporary reader, impressed by Canfield's portrait of the home front in all its unglamorous reality, this view comes as something of a shock: it is frightening to see

that Canfield does not realise the extent to which the minds and bodies of the nation's women have become part of its war machine. But this is not the point of her story, for Canfield is interested in writing about the possibility of rebuilding a shattered nation, an ideal that is presented in this story through the endeavours of the couple to rebuild their house and garden, to save their fruit trees which "had been neatly and dexterously murdered" (HF 52). In constant references to Nidart's strength and his wife's deference to it, Canfield asserts that the solution to this devastation is to reconstruct, as nearly as possible, the domestic state which existed before the war. The bulbs which have survived the German onslaught because "[w]hat was in the ground, alive, they could not kill" (HF 27), become, for Canfield, the symbol of restoration. That which preceded the blitz will prove to be the release from it. Of course, this sentiment has ironic resonance for the contemporary reader who knows that this is precisely what the patriarchy would attempt in the post-war years when, even in countries which did commit themselves to limited suffrage for women, every attempt was made to strip from them such freedoms as they had enjoyed during the conflict⁴. But it is tempting to assert that the fact of a woman's wholeheartedly supporting such conservatism is proof of the extent to which some were coopted by the war. It seems to me, however, in the light of Canfield's later stories, that "The Permissionaire" is more accurately assessed as an early contemplation of the extent to which the war would alter the way of life of French people. The story ends with the poignant, if rather romantic, image of Nidart starting back to the trenches only to realise that it is his garden rake that he holds in his hand, that he has "forgotten his gun" (HF 59). It is through this Biblical echo of the exchange of the military for the domestic tool that Canfield expresses the wastefulness of war, its devastation not only of people's lives, but of the economy and ecology of the world in which they used to live. As filled with bitterness and irony as are the pens of the men who went through the war, I do not think that so poignant and apposite an analogy of the private price of such conflict could have come from one of them.

After Nidart's story, Canfield turns to recording the experiences of French men and women with whom she came in contact. "Vignettes from Life at the Rear" and "The Refugee" give one a fairly unmediated view of life in wartime France. In "A Little Kansas Leaven", however, Canfield turns her attention to the experiences of a young American woman who decides that she can make a small but important contribution to the war. The story of Ellen Boardman's involvement in a charity for refugees is interesting for its subtle criticism of an America that was still indecisive about a commitment to the war effort, and its not-so-subtle commentary on the type of idle bourgeois women who dabble in war charities because it has become the socially acceptable thing to do. Canfield's heroine is forced to return home before the war is over because she runs out of money (she refuses to accept payment for her war work, living, instead, on her modest savings) and it is without a trace of irony that the story ends with the worthy citizens of Ellen's home-town, influenced by her tales of the suffering in Europe,

enthusiastically raising funds to send one of its young men to France to train as an ambulance driver, while Ellen herself fades gracefully—and even gratefully—back into the confines of her old life.

Canfield's criticism of the fashionable and their war-work emerges again in "The Honeymoon... Vive L' Amerique", a tale about two wealthy Americans who decide to celebrate their recent marriage by assisting "behind the lines" of established war charities. Her witty exposure of the greed and social mobility that is exhibited by some of the self-styled war-workers with whom her odd couple come in contact is similar to Wharton's lampooning of the same social scene in *A Son at the Front*, even while Canfield is also interested to celebrate the depth of courage and humanity that dire circumstances reveal in people like her selfless honeymooners and those whom they assist.

Canfield's interest in the roles that women are able to play in the world, especially in times of national crisis, is, not surprisingly given the strength of the Suffragist movement before the war, a major theme of her stories. She shows us women who, despite the tremendous personal losses they have suffered, are able to contribute great strength and knowledge to the work that they are now being allowed to do. The Directrice in "Eyes for the Blind", and Dr Nicole Girard-Mangin in "France's Fighting Woman Doctor", are both presented as part of the ongoing argument for women's social and civic equality. She emphasises their competence, sympathy and capacity for sheer hard work, but, although she mentions that Dr Girard-Mangin is soon returned to the rear where she is relegated to the feminine role of establishing a school for nurses, and acknowledges the extent to which this new job is inferior to her years of active service at the Front, Canfield refrains from making the connection, as Vera Brittain does in *Testament to Youth*, between her removal and the increasing male anxiety about women's role in society that was to result in such a backlash against women after the war.

"La Pharmacienne", another story in *Home Fires in France*, is slightly more daring in its assertions of women's ability to succeed at jobs that were reserved for men. In fact, Madeleine Brismantier, who has lived a life of perfect bourgeois wifedom until the outbreak of hostilities, shows remarkable courage and ingenuity in hiding the village's stock of pharmaceuticals at the moment when the Germans invade. She is saved from personal harm by the fact that she goes into labour soon after the invasion. Canfield's description of Madeleine's courage and presence of mind as she delivers her baby without the help of a midwife is a moving reminder that women have to suffer other dangers in wartime than those of the war alone.

Canfield's American social sensibility is evident in "La Pharmacienne" when she describes the process through which Madeleine's thoroughly middle-class soul is democratised. Although the connection is not explicit, she seems to suggest that the extreme protection of women, which is evident in Madeleine's pre-war pursuits, is also partly responsible for the social structure of France: it becomes obvious that Canfield's nostalgia for the French way of life, as described in

the first story in the collection, is not entirely naive, and that, even while she records it, she is willing to acknowledge its limitations. It is only when Madeleine must deal with her husband's clients that she realises how unreal her existence has been. She reaches a greater understanding of how people in her village actually live when she becomes, like them, penniless, linen-less, reduced to surviving by her wits. That she can do so, and take care of three young children at the same time, is testimony to the potential of women that has been wasted in the narrowly gendered lives of the French. This feminist insight is, however, slightly undercut when Madeleine is asked to help some wounded German soldiers who have been left behind in the general retreat. Her compassion, Christianity and humanity are appealed to, and the clincher is an exhortation to her to consider how she would want German women to treat her husband in similar circumstances. Whereas a writer like Brittain uses her experience of nursing "the enemy" to ponder the nature of internationalism and analyse the futility of a war between people who could not really, at heart, hate one another, Canfield shows no inclination to see the fact of Madeleine's helping German soldiers as anything other than the demonstration of womanly good form. One is left with a disappointing sense that, for all her sense of female possibility, Canfield's ideas have not been fundamentally altered by her experience of war.

This inability to discover the possibility for profound change is reflected in "What Goes Up...", a much later anecdote collected in *Raw Material*. It is the story of a group of mostly elderly Frenchwomen who survived, and triumphed over, their incarceration in a German prison of war. In a manner which resembles Madeleine's coming to conscience about the social conditions that pre-date the war, Octavie Moreau, a strong and competent but utterly self-involved professor of Science at a girl's lycée in Tourciennes, learns an enormous amount about her fellow citizens only when she is thrust into their company in the narrow confines of the prison. The story of these women's survival is quite remarkable, and one is moved by their courageous and creative determination to stay alive. They organise themselves, mind and body, around their determination to endure: there is not a soul in the group who is not considered to have something of value to share with her cell-mates. However, the tale ends on an unsatisfactory—and rather puzzling—note, for Canfield tells us that visits to Tourciennes five years after the war have revealed a universe that continues, quite unperturbed, in its accustomed round:

"I found the housewives concerned about their preserves and the hang of their skirts; the businesswomen deep in calculations.... The mothers...bringing up their children very hard...very much concerned about their knowing the children of the right people and no others..."

Octavie herself is worried only about yet another improvement to her domain, a "little green-house she was having built back of her kitchen" (*RM* 67-8). There is no indication at all that the

spirit which bound these women during their imprisonment had any purpose beyond its immediate circumstances. Does Canfield's title self-consciously warn us that something is missing from the experience, or is she commenting, however wryly, on the unchanged status of Frenchwoman 1918?

It may be possible, in fact, to read the incomplete aphorism as hinting that something important is missing from Canfield's story—something, perhaps even the achievement of female liberation itself, which her taste for veracity disallows her from writing. Although "What Goes Up..." celebrates the self-determination that is courageously achieved *in extremis*, Canfield is not afraid to follow her heroines back into ordinary life where she shows the torpidity and conservatism that affects them when they have "come down." Olive Schreiner had already expressed, in *Women and Labour*, what she believed to be an "almost axiomatic" truth: that "the women of no race or class will ever rise in revolt or attempt to bring about a revolutionary readjustment of their relation to their society, however intense their suffering and however clear their perception of it, while the welfare and persistence of their society requires their submission" (14). Schreiner's observation on the position of woman is an astute one and "What Goes Up..." embodies, only too accurately, her aphorism. It is disappointing that Canfield, even while she celebrates the strength of women in her story, cannot quite bring herself to see what the wider social implications of their successful strategies for survival may be.

Dorothy Canfield's war stories are often frustrating and inconclusive when seen from the perspective of a late twentieth century feminist reader—which is just as Olive Schreiner anticipated such writing would seem. Unlike the work of some of her contemporaries, whose style reflects the strength of expression that Modernism allowed, Canfield's observations of the human catastrophe that is World War I seem dated and plodding. But perhaps that very factor, strangely enough, is their claim to strength: as Gertrude Stein writes in *Wars I Have Seen*, "Incontestably the 1914-1918 war was a nineteenth century war" (74). This war "tried to end the nineteenth century but since it itself did not understand it, it could not end the nineteenth century" (76). Canfield's stories reflect exactly this observation: the world which went to war was never to be recaptured; it was the end of an era and a way of life. Her writing is a product of this change, and if she does not, at times, wholly understand that the world in which she lived has gone, she was certainly not alone in her misapprehension. Canfield's collected war stories can, I think, be read as a documentary of an upheaval which was too immense for a contemporary mind to explore: possibly they suffer from having been written too close to the event, and before a new literary language could develop sufficiently to express this momentous episode. They are, it may be argued, poised on the cusp of a new world order, sad reliquaries for an age that, even as it brought with it emotions and ideals, and a number of the social inequalities of a bygone time, had catapulted itself into an epoch with which we are still struggling to come to terms.

Notes

1. Ironically, only a nuclear war would have had direct impact on American women's domestic space, since in none of the wars fought by America this century has a shot been fired on American soil. This fact is reflected in the war criticism of women in the United States.
2. See for example Helen Zenna Smith's *Not So Quiet...*, Rebecca West's *War Nurse*, and Edith Wharton's short stories.
3. The fact that Canfield was herself to lose her son—who appears in her Great War stories as a small child—in the Second World War, leads even greater irony to this aspect of her work.
4. For excellent accounts of this process, see Cadogan, Mary and Patricia Craig. *Women and Children First: The Fiction of Two World Wars*. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1978; and Tylee, Claire. *The Great War and Women's Consciousness: Images of Militarism and Womanhood in Woman's Writings 1914-64*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990.

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